

Letter to parents – Virginia Barry – former New Hampshire Education Commissioner

March 28, 2023

Dear Parents,

I strongly support the establishment of a special-purpose school district as proposed by the towns of Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton. As the former Commissioner of Education for the State of New Hampshire (2009-2017), I had the pleasure of visiting many excellent schools in our state. The State of New Hampshire has much to be proud of with its continued ranking in the nation's top five states for educational success. As Commissioner, I was often asked to explain our success to the public. Of course, we have many outstanding teachers and leaders committed to our children, families, and communities. However, there is another critical factor in our state's national achievements. The movement of school choice options available to nearly 320,000 children through bi-partisan leadership has helped define our state as one that supports parent choice. Currently is one of the only states that support traditional public schools, public charter schools, public magnet schools, private schools, online academies, and homeschooling. All these choices are available to families to choose what is in the best interest of their child's needs, family values, and sustainable communities.

New Hampshire places great value on our small towns and their role in the stability critical to the economic health of our state. Citizens of New Hampshire have a voice, whether it's water quality, access to nature, housing choices, transportation, and many other components of infrastructure. Our residents know that our governmental structure cares what they have to say. The heart of our great state remains focused on our communities and their needs, including recognizing that times have changed. Our small towns' safety, vibrancy, and sustainability should remain a commitment in our governing structure. Recognition of the changing times refers to helping towns meet the community's educational, health, and safety needs. The towns of Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton have demonstrated their deep devotion to quality education and the desire to have a school that reflects an understanding of the importance of family values in their schools. A sense of pride and conservation of small-town togetherness in daily life. The school these community members envision is another example of choice in our state, with a serious commitment to a "sense" of the future and everyday safety and fellowship so needed in our society.

This perseverance is especially evident when in 1999, the communities of Bridgewater and Hebron joined to construct a modern school building open to all towns in the Newfound Area school district. The building was separate from their existing cooperative school district obligations, and since 2000, the towns leased the facility to the school district for \$1.00 per year. The maintenance and building upgrade costs are the sole responsibilities of the

Bridgewater-Hebron Village District. Concurrently, the facility is open to many local agencies for community activities to support extracurricular sports and boys' and girls' community clubs. The school presently houses a Pre-K, full-day kindergarten program, and grades first through fifth. Children from other towns in the cooperative school district currently constitute 55% of the Bridgewater-Hebron school enrollment. The proposed legislation will not impact other community's enrollment if the K-8 expansion is approved. Fiscal constraints in the SAU4 prevent the adoption of this enhanced program configuration.

Recent research focusing on Pre-K and K-8 school configuration has continued to grow, focusing on the importance of children's social-emotional (SEL) needs in our current society. Intuitive leaders in our state might consider looking at the multiple benefits for K-8 students in the same school setting. The benefits include improved student social-emotional skills, positive attitudes about self and others, connection to school and town, academic performance, and reduced conduct problems and emotional distress. It's hard to imagine the minds of children when bombarded with social media focused on violence every day throughout our country. A school with community support and a belief that citizens "own" the school with an intense commitment to success and a healthy mindset is the best we can offer our children.

The proposal seeks to promote a community K-8 school to enhance learning and social-emotional competence based on the three towns' choices to support the critical years of development K-8. The K-8 structure provides a positive learning environment that promotes trust, initiative, and autonomy. A K-8 school program has proven to improve academic performance and greater community involvement when parent choice is acknowledged.

In closing, this proposal supports the spirit of New Hampshire's history, encouraging choice, community connectedness, and success for all citizens. I urge the House Education Committee to consider this forward-thinking proposal. The potential outcomes of success for the students and recognition of the people's desire to protect and educate their children only strengthen our state.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts on this worthy proposal. Despite the challenges facing our nation, I believe that New Hampshire will continue to lead the country in educational success and promote and safeguard our children and communities,

Respectfully submitted,

Virginia M. Barry

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